

NATIONAL CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT UNDER COMMUNISM

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Muslims of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Transcaucasia, Chechens and Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and all you whose mosques and prayer houses have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the Tsars and the oppressors of Russia. Henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Organize your national life in complete freedom. This is your right. 1/

Thus read in part a proclamation issued on 7 December 1917 by the Bolsheviks over the signatures of Lenin and Stalin, addressed to "All Muslim toilers of Russia and the East." The Bolsheviks had realized that if their revolution was to be a complete success and if they were to be able to consolidate their newly-won power, the support of Russia's minority peoples, including the Muslims, was essential. Hence this proclamation. Other pronouncements designed for the same purpose were also issued. For example, a previous declaration, also signed by Lenin and Stalin, issued on 15 November 1917, had stated:

The Council of People's Commissars had decided to base its activities with regard to the nationalities of Russia on the following principles:

1. Equality and sovereignty of the nations of Russia.
2. The right of nations to free self-determination, including the right to secede and form independent states.
3. Abolition of all national and national-religious privileges and restrictions whatsoever.
4. Freedom of development for the national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia. 2/

The Muslim peoples of Russia had, at the time, no way of knowing how little a Bolshevik, i.e., Communist, promise meant. The two declarations, therefore, at first kindled great hopes among them. Colonial subjects of the Tsar, whose lands had been forcibly incorporated into and held as part of the Russian Empire, they fervently desired national independence; and these proclamations seemed an open invitation to them to declare their freedom from Russian rule and to create their own national states. The Tsarist regime therefore appeared as the chief enemy of the Muslims as of the Bolsheviks, so the former were easily persuaded to cooperate with the latter.

Disillusionment was rapid. Muslim leaders were at first feasted and feted by the Bolsheviks; but as the power of the latter grew, they soon showed that their promises had been only a tactical maneuver. The newly-established independent Muslim governments were ruthlessly suppressed by the Red Army and Russian rule re-imposed as the Bolsheviks forgot their promises to recognize the right of self-determination.

The history of the Communists during the 40 years they have been in power in the Soviet Union shows that self-determination has not been the only subject on which they have betrayed both their promises and their alleged doctrine. Throughout their years of power, and especially since World War II in their propaganda to the peoples of Asia and Africa, the Communists have boasted of their success in solving the "nationalities problem" by building a multi-national state in which every nationality is equal and has full opportunity for a free national cultural development. A brief examination of the record, however, shows that the permitted opportunity for national cultural development is severely limited where it exists at all and is, in any case, without exception, so controlled and warped as to serve not the needs and aspirations of the various peoples but only the interests of the Communist Party and Great Russian chauvinism.

Let us, for example, consider the position of Islam. In the Muslim regions of Russia, as in Muslim lands everywhere at that time, Islam was the hearthstone around which the life of its devotees revolved, or rather did revolve until the Communists violated their promises and made it impossible for Muslims to perform their religious duties. As we have seen, the November 1917 proclamation promised Muslims that they would be free to continue in the practice of their faith. Even some years before the Revolution, in an article entitled "To the Rural Poor," Lenin had written:

Everyone must be perfectly free not only to belong to whatever religion he pleases, but he must be free to disseminate his religion and to change his religion. No official should be entitled to ask anyone about his religion; it is a matter for that person's conscience and no one has any business to interfere. 3/

A decree on the separation of church from state, issued 5 February 1918, declared in Article 3 that "Every citizen may profess any religion or none;" in Article 5 that "Free practice of religious rites is guaranteed;" and in Article 9 that "Citizens may teach and study religion privately." 4/

Once the Communists had consolidated their power, however, they began to reveal their true nature, to violate their earlier promises, and to take repressive acts. Lands belonging to mosques were confiscated by a decree in 1918; Muslim religious brotherhoods were outlawed during the period 1921-22; and a campaign was launched to ridicule Islam and to undermine the influence of the spiritual leaders of the Muslim peoples. Freedom to teach religion had been defended

by Lenin before the Revolution and guaranteed by law immediately after the Revolution, but soon Article 122 of a new criminal code made it a crime, carrying punishment of one year's correctional labor, to teach religion to children and minors, either in public or in private.

In 1929, a direct attack on Islam was begun which included measures that made active religious life virtually impossible. Islamic leadership was eliminated by the arrest and deportation, if not liquidation, of almost all persons enjoying any religious status; nearly all village and most city mosques were closed (see below); religious literature was suppressed through the changing of alphabets, the confiscation of existing religious texts, including the Qur'an, and the suppression of all publications of a religious nature; and anyone in a responsible position was dismissed if known to be a pious and practicing Muslim.

Muslims were to be free to practice their beliefs and customs--that was the Bolshevik promise. But is not Islam part of those beliefs? Is it not the most vital and most deeply cherished part of Muslim life? Yet the Communists, in spite of their commitment, have suppressed Islam ruthlessly. Take the matter of mosques, for example. When the Communists came to power in 1917, there were 7,000 mosques in European Russia alone in addition to the unnumbered thousands in Muslim Central Asia, the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, and the Crimea. But in 1942 the Communists themselves admitted that there were then only 1,312 mosques in the whole of the Soviet Union. The others had been confiscated and converted into warehouses or stores or otherwise desecrated or allowed to fall into ruins. Yet in the November 1917 proclamation, the Bolsheviks had condemned the Tsars for destroying mosques and prayer houses and called for Muslim support so that such actions could be brought to an end!

Although a few mosques have been built in the post-war period and a few others repaired, the situation is little better than it was in 1942. In Tashkent, for example, where once 300 mosques graced the city before the Communists came to power, there are today only 20. Samarkand, which formerly had over 100, today has only 17, of which only one is permitted to be used. Bokhara, which once boasted of 360, has also only one today. Alma-Ata, a Muslim town for centuries and the capital of the Muslim republic of Kazakhstan, has not a single mosque, nor are any to be found in such large Muslim centers as Krasnovodsk, Ashkabad, or Stalinabad.

The same story holds true for the madrasahs, or religious schools. Before the Communist regime there were at least 8,000. The 103 madrasahs which were once the pride of Bokhara's Muslims and which used to train 16,000 mullahs annually are no more. Today there is only one--the only one, in fact, in the entire Soviet Union--which has a mere 105 students who follow a nine-year course.

Such is the manner in which the Communists honor their promise to respect Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions!

The same fate that befell the mosques and madrasahs has also been the fate of the Shariah, the Holy Law of Islam. This too the Communists promised to respect--but we know what a Communist promise means. Speaking to the Daghestani people at Temir-Khan-Shura (now Buinaksk) on 13 November 1920, Stalin declared:

We are informed that the Shariah has great importance for the peoples of Daghestan. We are also informed that the enemies of Soviet power are spreading rumors that the Soviet regime would ban the Shariah. I am authorized to declare here on behalf of the Government of the RSFSR that these rumors are lies. The Government of Russia leaves to every people the full right to administer itself on the basis of its own laws and customs. The Soviet Government considers the Shariah as customary law of the same standing as that in force among the other peoples living in Russia. If it is the desire of the people of Daghestan their laws and customs shall be preserved. 5/

This is a fine assuring statement, for could there be a clearer and more binding commitment on the part of the Communists to respect the Shariah? Unfortunately it did not mean anything, for it was only another example of the fact that the Communists constantly say one thing and then do another. The truth is that Stalin knew he was speaking a lie, knew that the Communists had no intention of respecting the Shariah, for only a month earlier, in an article published in the 10 October 1920 issue of Pravda (which, of course, the Daghestanis had not seen nor had any way of knowing about), he had declared:

... if, for instance, the Daghestani masses, who are profoundly imbued with religious prejudices, follow the Communists "on the basis of the Shariah," it is obvious that the direct methods of combatting religious prejudices in this country must be replaced by indirect and more cautious methods. 6/

In other words, political expediency required the Communists to make promises now and break them later. This is exactly what the Communists did. The Soviet Government for a time allowed the Shariah to continue in force. In 1922 it even established Shariah courts in Turkestan and then later, in 1924-25, in the course of the agrarian reform, had recourse to these courts to obtain favorable declarations from the Muslim divines. But once they had served their purpose, all Shariah courts were abolished, especially after the initiation of the vigorous anti-Islam campaign in 1929. 7/ As the January 1950 issue of the Soviet periodical Sovetskoye Gosudarstvo i Pravo put it:

Stalinist precepts, when carried out, quickly led to the elimination of the old-fashioned beliefs in the law of Allah, the Shariah, and, before long, the Shariah eliminated itself and was liquidated.

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Stalin, in 1920, had praised the Shariah as Muslim customary law; but the Soviet Political Dictionary (1940) describes it as "a means for keeping the workers in economic and political subordination by the rich. It legalizes domination, exploitation and slavery of the workers, the enslavement of women," and states flatly that "in the USSR, now, the Shariah is eradicated." Stalin, in 1920 praised the Shariah as Muslim customary law; but Kizil Uzbekistan, on 29 May 1949, described it as "a collection of laws which are among the most ignoble and unjust in the world."

Such is the manner in which Communists honor their promises, the way in which they respect Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions!

The Communists have not been content to close mosques and madrasahs, suppress the Shariah, and liquidate Muslim religious leaders; they even insult the Islamic faith itself and its Holy Prophet (God bless and keep him!). One Communist writer, in setting forth the official party line, described Islam as a "primitive and fanatical religion" which is "a chaotic mixture of Christian, Jewish, and pagan doctrines." 8/ And Bagirov, the apostate First Secretary of the Azerbaidzhan Communist Party, in a speech printed in the 14 July 1950 issue of Bobinski Rabotchi (Baku), called the Prophet Muhammad (May God bless and keep him!) "a representative of the feudal-mercantile aristocracy of Mecca who utilized Islam for the unification of the Arab tribes and for the maintenance of their own power." Yet, despite these blasphemies against Islam and Muhammad (May God bless and keep him!), the Communists are today trying to persuade the Muslim peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that they have no better friends than the Communists!

The Holy Qur'an makes incumbent upon every true believer the faithful observance of the five Pillars of Islam: profession of the faith, prayer, alms giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. These all formed an integral part of the beliefs and customs of the Muslim peoples of Russia--which the Communists promised to respect. But today the Pillars are proscribed in the Soviet Union. Only the profession of the faith can be made without hindrance; but even this must be done in secret unless the pious Muslim wishes to run the risk of being subjected to pressure, economic or otherwise, on the part of the authorities. Prayer, too, is impossible for the same reason. In any case, the Muslim worker is not permitted to leave his work to recite his prayers at the appointed times, and the communal Friday prayer is precluded by the absence of mosques and by the fact that the Kremlin has decreed that Muslims must observe Sunday rather than the traditional Muslim Friday as the weekly day of rest. The younger generation, having been deprived of religious instruction, is further handicapped by its ignorance of the prayers.

Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan is almost impossible. A Muslim worker, if he should decide to defy the Communist ban on fasting, is nevertheless forced to do a full day's work; and the penalty for failure to observe the fast is severe.

norm is severe. Consequently, fasting has been made virtually physically impossible. Moreover, as a means of enforcing the ban, Muslims are frequently subjected to tests during Ramadan. For example, they may be called in for conference by their superiors and there offered a drink or a cigarette. Refusal to accept is tantamount to an admission of fasting and may well lead to dismissal if not to more severe punishment.

Alms giving, or zakat, is rigorously prohibited by law. The Criminal Codes of the Uzbek, Tadzhik, and Turkmen Republics, as well as that of the RSFSR which is also enforced in the Kirghiz and Kazakh Republics, provide criminal penalties for the collection of such religious tithes. The fifth Pillar, the hajj, or pilgrimage, was banned by the Communists from the early days of their regime. As a result of wartime concessions, the ban was lifted in 1944, only to be re-imposed in 1947. While the ban was again lifted after Stalin's death, this was more in theory than in practice, for the only Soviet Muslims to have made the trip to Mecca have been faithful Communists whose purpose in making the hajj is not primarily to fulfill any religious duty but to propagandize. The ordinary Soviet Muslim is still prevented from making the pilgrimage.

Such is the manner in which the Communists have respected Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions!

Let us turn now to a consideration of some other aspects of Muslim life and culture in the Soviet Union. The VIIth All-Russian Conference of the Russian Social-Democrat Labor Party (the former name of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in April 1917 adopted a resolution which read, in part: "The Party demands wide regional autonomy, the abolition of a compulsory state language ..." 9/ This was part of the Bolshevik campaign to win the support of Russia's minority peoples. A people's language is without doubt the most treasured part of its culture, and a people will fight as hard, if not harder, to preserve that heritage as to win political independence. The Bolsheviks knew this. Stalin, in fact, in his Marxism and the National Question, had written:

A minority is discontented not because there is no national union but because it does not enjoy the right to use its native language. Permit it to use its native language and the discontent will pass of itself.

Once the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power, however, this liberal view of the language question began to change and Great Russian chauvinism once again began to emerge. Lenin saw the danger; and in a letter written on 31 December 1922, not meant for general publication, he warned that:

it is necessary to set the strictest rules concerning the use of national languages in the national republics

which enter the union and to abide by those rules with especial carefulness. There is no doubt that, under the pretext of unity of the railroad service, under the pretext of fiscal unity, and so forth, with our present apparatus a mass of abuses of genuinely Russian character will take place. 10/

After Lenin's death, the trend he had foreseen gathered more and more strength as the Soviet leaders forgot their early promise not to accord special rights to any single language. The climax came on 13 March 1938 when the Kremlin issued a decree which made the teaching of Russian henceforth obligatory in all national minority schools.

Today, Russian is not only taught in all schools but has also, through the force of political, economic and legal pressures, become the language of all business and social life in every part of the Soviet Union. Every Soviet citizen, regardless of his national origin, is compelled to make use of it if he is to achieve any success in his career, whatever that may be. Course work at universities and other higher educational institutions in the USSR, even those located in Muslim areas, is carried on in Russian. This not only strengthens the privileged position of Russian but it keeps many minority youths from obtaining advanced education since their training in the Russian language has been so poor that they do not qualify. As a result, only a small percentage of the graduates of educational institutions in Muslim areas are actually Muslim. For example, in March 1947, the rector of the Kazakh State University admitted that since the university's founding in 1934, only 17 percent of all graduates were Kazakh. Similarly of the 1,100 students graduated by the Uzbek State University in Samarkand from 1927 to 1947, only slightly more than half were Asiatics, the rest having been Russians and others of European descent. Parallel examples could also be adduced for all other Muslim areas and their higher educational institutions.

Not only have the Communists violated their promise not to institute a compulsory state language, but they have also been making a determined effort to Russianize the various minority languages. Communist writers and grammarians are trying slowly to change the structure of the minority languages to make them conform as much as possible with the Russian model; and when new words are needed in a language, the Communists do not permit them to be formed from native roots but require that they be adapted from the Russian equivalents. Illustrative of this is the statement of the Russian press, speaking of a linguistics conference which met at Baku in January 1951:

The duty of linguists is to write really scientific works on the origin and history of the language, in doing which they must fully show the favorable influence of the Russian language on it, and must establish the identical elements in the two languages. The language must be en-

The above quotation was in reference specifically to the Azerbaidzhani language, but the same principles are being applied to all minority languages, including those spoken by the various Muslim peoples.

Violence has also been done to the minority languages in another manner. The Muslim peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus, at the time of the 1917 Revolution, had long used the Arabic script for their languages. As part of their campaign against Islam and in order to weaken the ties between Russia's Muslims and the Muslims of other lands, the Kremlin, in the 1920's, decreed that henceforth all minority languages should be written in Latin alphabets. Then, a decade later, a new change was ordered and Cyrillic scripts replaced the recently adopted Latin ones. In neither case were the wishes of the minority peoples taken into consideration. The Communists in Moscow simply decided that these far-reaching changes should be made and then forced them upon the people. Such is the Communist idea of "free national cultural development."

One aspect of the linguistic heritage of any people is its literature, for it is in its literature that a people's language is preserved and perpetuated. But consider what this Communist-dictated change of alphabets meant. The new generations, since they would be taught only the new script, were cut off from free access to their nation's literature, for the Soviet Government, being in complete control of all printing establishments, could, and did, authorize republication in the new scripts only of such works as it decided would serve the interests of the Communist Party. The fact is that since the imposition of Cyrillic scripts, almost all of the books published in the various minority languages have been translations of Russian works, especially the writings of Lenin, Stalin, and other Communist Party theoreticians. The traditional native literary works remain unpublished and hence are not available to the present and future generations. This situation is especially grievous for Muslim youth since the Soviet Government does not permit the publication of almost all Islamic works.

The Communists have, at the same time, begun a systematic campaign to ridicule and denounce the native folk literature as a means of justifying their suppression of it. The great Kirghiz epic Manas, portraying the struggle between the Kirghiz people and the Chinese, once viewed with favor by the Soviets, is now condemned as "antipopular," "reactionary" and "an idealization of Khans and feudal lords." The Azerbaidzhani epic Dede Korkut (which is also the Turkmen epic under the name Korkut Ata), once considered as an example of the highest type of popular poetry and of "people's expression," has somehow, in Communist eyes, become a reactionary bourgeois poem. Kublandibatur, the Kazakh epic, is no longer a paean of national virtue and valor but "low patter, extolling violence and brigandage, steeped in the poison of hatred of other peoples, in reactionary Muslim ideology and ideas of Pan-Islamism." The same applies to the other minority literatures.

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as have a multitude of works of lesser stature. The fact is that the Communists condemn--and therefore prevent the publication of--all Muslim literary works except those few which extol the virtues of Russia and the Russians.

Such is the manner in which the Communists respect Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions!

Or let us take the matter of history, which, along with religion, language and literature, constitute the core of a people's cultural heritage. Here again the Communists have interfered in a shameless manner. For example, on 9 August 1944, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, sitting in Moscow, issued a directive ordering the party's Tartar Provincial Committee "to proceed to a scientific revision of the history of Tartaria, to liquidate serious shortcomings and mistakes of a nationalistic character committed by individual writers and historians in dealing with Tartar history." <sup>12/</sup> In other words, Tartar history was to be rewritten--let us be frank, was to be falsified--in order to eliminate references to Great Russian aggressions and to hide the facts of the real course of Tartar-Russian relations. And this was no isolated case. In every Muslim area within the USSR, historians, on orders of the Communist Party, have rewritten history to distort the facts so that the Russians appear always in a good light. Needless to say, histories which present the facts truthfully have been withdrawn and destroyed, so that the present and future generations of Muslims are forever denied the chance of learning the true facts of their nations' past.

Such is the manner in which Communists respect Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions!

The resurgence of Great Russian chauvinism, especially since World War II, has also resulted in a campaign to vilify the historic heroes of the various Muslim peoples. For example, as late as 1947, Kenesary Kasymov, the leader of the 1837-1846 Kazakh resistance to Russian aggression--and the national hero of the Kirghiz as well--was accepted by the Communists as a fighter for national liberation. But in June 1949 Voprosy Istorii, in an article on Kazakh history, declared that "Kenesary's policy directed at the creation of a centralized state was an expression of his usurpational efforts to subordinate all other holders of power to himself." On 26 December 1950, Pravda published a virulent attack on the mistakes of historians of Kazakhstan and made Kenesary and his brother out as black villains. Communist, Great Russian, interests required that his name be besmirched, so Kazakh history was rewritten. And the Communists call this "free cultural development!"

Or take the case of Shamy1, the great hero of Caucasian resistance to Russian aggression, who has received the same treatment as Kenesary. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, in an early edition published before systematic rewriting of history began, described him as "the leader of the national liberation

movement of the Caucasian mountain peoples, which was directed against the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia." His denigration began in 1947 at a conference of the Historical Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences, when one speaker denounced Shamil's movement as not having been one for national liberation but a struggle "for freedom for wolves, for freedom for backwardness, oppression, darkness, Asiaticism." Other conference members did not receive the speech well and some even reproached Shamil's detractor; and nothing further was heard on the subject for three years. In March 1950, one Geidar Guseimov was given a Stalin Prize for his book History of Nineteenth Century Social and Philosophical Thought in Azerbaidzhan, in which Shamil was portrayed sympathetically. But only two months later, in May, the Prize was rescinded and the Prize Committee administered a sharp rebuke, declaring that Guseimov's appraisal of Shamil "basically distorts the meaning of the movement, which was reactionary and nationalistic, and was in the service of British capitalism and the Turkish sultan." After that, the history of another minority people was rewritten to meet the needs of Great Russian chauvinism. And the Communists call this "free cultural development!"

Perhaps the best example of the Communist contempt for the rights of the minority peoples of the Soviet Union and of the emptiness of their boast of "free cultural development" is the wartime liquidation of several entire Muslim peoples: Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachai, as well as the Buddhist Kalmyk people. It is hard to conceive of a clearer violation of the promise to permit "free cultural development," for how can there be a culture or cultural development if a people is liquidated or dispersed in small units amidst other peoples? How can this be reconciled with the Communist pledge, as contained in the 1917 Proclamation, to respect Muslim beliefs and customs, Muslim national and cultural institutions?

Stalin and his cohorts attempted at the time to justify this genocide on the grounds of military necessity, but the following statement shows the falsity of this claim:

All the more monstrous are the acts whose initiator was Stalin and which are rude violations of the basic Leninist principles of the nationality policy of the Soviet state. We refer to the mass deportations from their native places of whole nations ...; this deportation action was not dictated by any military necessity.

Thus, already at the end of 1943 ... a decision was taken and executed concerning the deportation of all the Karachai from the lands on which they lived. In the same period, at the end of December 1943, the same lot befell the whole population of the Autonomous Kalmyk Republic. In March 1944 all the Chechen and Ingush peoples were deported and the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic was liquidated. In April 1944 all Balkars

many of them and there was no place to which to deport them. 13/

This statement makes clear the callous violation of national minority rights by the Kremlin. And it is not merely a propaganda statement written by some Western anti-Communist but it came from the mouth of Nikita Krushchev, present head of the Communist Party, during his speech to the party's XXth Congress on 25 February 1956. He claimed that it was all due to Stalin; but the fact remains that if the Kremlin masters had the power to violate minority rights once in so brutal a fashion, they can do so again whenever they might so choose. It is simply another illustration of the meaninglessness of the Communist boast about "free cultural development."

In his well-known essay Marxism and the National Question, written in 1913 before the Communists came to power, Stalin wrote:

... only the nation itself has the right to determine its destiny. ... no one has the right forcibly to interfere in the life of the nation, to destroy its schools and other institutions, to violate its habits and customs, to repress its language, or curtail its rights .... 14/

And in "Counter-Revolution and the Peoples of Russia," an article published on 13 August 1917, Stalin wrote:

But no one has the right to interfere in the internal life of a nation and by force "correct" its mistakes. Nations are sovereign in matters of internal life, and they have the right to manage themselves according to their own desires. 15/

The record of 40 years of Communist rule, however, shows that every one of these principles professed by the Communists before they won power has been systematically and constantly violated. The Kremlin has interfered forcibly in the life of the various minority nations in every conceivable manner; the latter's schools and other institutions, for example, mosques and madrasahs, have been destroyed; their languages have been repressed or at least changed and corrupted; their rights have been curtailed; and their right to rule themselves according to their own desires has been infringed.

These statements are especially true of the Muslim peoples of the Soviet Union. Once they were subject colonial peoples of Tsarist Russia, today they are subject colonial peoples of Soviet Russia. The only difference is that under Tsarist rule they enjoyed cultural autonomy; whereas today, despite the Communist boast of "free cultural development" permitted every nation within the borders of the USSR, the

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Muslims are deprived of their own culture and are more and more being forced to adopt a culture shaped

by the needs of Great Russian chauvinism, i.e., are being Russianized. The other Muslim peoples of the world would do well to reflect on the fate of their unfortunate co-religionists before they accept the Communist propaganda now being directed at them. For there can be little doubt but that if ever the Communists were to gain control of their lands, they would suffer the same fate.

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